The Role of Jewish Defense Organizations in Palestine (1903–1948)

Hannah Arendt succinctly expressed the belief of the early Zionists: “Palestine was conceived as the place, the only place, where Jews could escape: from Jew-hatred … At the core of this hope … we find the old mentality of enslaved peoples, the belief that it does not pay to fight back, that we must dodge and escape in order to survive.”[1]

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Early Jewish Defense

Once they had escaped, the Jews expected to be welcomed with open arms into their homeland. When they were not, they were hesitant to fight for what they believed was rightfully theirs (in the early years their small number left them incapable of fighting). This pacifistic attitude dominated the early years of the Yishuv, but there were a few individuals who recognized at a very early stage that the Jews would have to fight for the land.

The earliest Jewish involvement in the violent struggle for Palestine occurred during World War I when Aaron Aaronson, a prominent scientist known for his discovery of wild wheat, organized an intelligence service, Nili, to operate behind Turkish lines for the British.

Other Jews realized that their fate was largely dependent on a British victory in the war and decided to try to join the British forces. A group of Jewish refugees led by Joseph Trumpeldor formed the Zion Mule Corps in 1915 but disbanded just a year later. A more significant contribution to the war effort was made possible by the determination of Zeev Jabotinsky.

Jabotinsky asked the British to form a Jewish brigade within the British army. The idea was initially rejected by the British and aroused opposition from many segments of English Jewry.

The British relented in 1918, forming the Jewish Legion that fought for Palestine as Chaim Weizmann negotiated for it.

Setting Up a Defense

After the war, Jabotinsky continued to be an activist. In the riots of 1920, he and Pinchas Rutenberg organized a defense force to protect the Jews from the Arab onslaught; however, the British prevented the force from entering Jerusalem. Nevertheless, Jabotinsky was sentenced to 15 years in prison for his alleged role in the riot. Thanks to a report absolving Jabotinsky from Colonel Richard Meinertzhagen, the Chief Political Officer for Palestine and Syria, the sentence was commuted.

The immediate impact of the riots was to convince the Jewish community in Palestine of the need to protect themselves. The first self-defense organization, Bar-Giora, had been established in 1907 by Yitzhak Ben Zvi (later second president of Israel) to protect the early settlements against Arab mob violence. Following the riots, the left-wing Achduth Ha'Avodah party established the Haganah on June 12, 1920, to protect the settlers. In 1923, Jabotinsky formed the Betar youth movement, named after the Roman fortress where Bar Kochba made his last stand in the second century, to propagate his revisionist ideas and militant politics.

The Haganah served as the principal defense force, but proved unable to protect the community in the 1929 riots. Some of the more militant members of the group led by Jerusalem commander Avraham Tehomi split off and formed a new organization they called Haganah Bet.

On December 5, 1936, Tehomi signed an agreement with Jabotinsky making Tehomi the group's commander and Jabotinsky its political leader. The alliance was short-lived, however, and Tehomi rejoined the Haganah a year later and took about one-third of his forces with him, agreeing to act according to the Jewish principle of *havlaga* (self-defense).

Again, there was a group of members, mainly Betarim, who weren't willing to restrict themselves to havlaga and advocated offensive action. They formed a new organization that accepted Jabotinsky's vision and believed that armed force was a prerequisite for the creation of a Jewish state, that Arabs who attacked Jews should expect retaliation, and that no one had a right to prevent Jews from immigrating. This organization became known as the Irgun Zvai Leumi (also known as IZL, Etzel, and the National Military Organization).

In 1937, the Irgun membership was only about 1,800. By comparison, the Haganah had approximately 17,000 men and 4,000 women under its command.

The Arab Revolt

The Jewish defenders were subdued in the face of increasingly hostile attacks by Arabs as the 1936-39 riots began. In September 1937, however, the Irgun retaliated for the murder of three Jews by launching an attack that left 13 Arabs dead. On November 14, the Irgun began a series of attacks against hostile Arab neighborhoods that killed ten Arabs and wounded many more.

The attacks outraged the Jewish Agency, which accused the Irgun of undermining their efforts to obtain a political settlement. The outcry induced the Irgun to return to the principle of *havlaga*, but this was only a temporary respite.

In 1938, David Raziel, who had organized the November 14 attacks, became commander of the Irgun. In that year, three Jews were arrested by the British after an attempted attack against the Arabs. One of the attackers was judged mentally unbalanced and released. The second was convicted and sentenced to death, but had his sentence commuted because he was under 18. The third man, Shlomo Ben-Yosef, was sentenced to death and hung on June 29, 1938. The British saw the punishment as an example for others, the Irgun considered it a challenge to be confronted, and the Arabs believed it to be an implicit endorsement of their rebellion.

After the execution, the Irgun stepped up its activity, attacking Arab headquarters in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv on July 4, 1938, killing five Arabs. On the 6th, bombs placed in milk cans exploded in a Haifa market killing 23 Arab shoppers and wounding 79. Another bombing, this time in Jerusalem on the 15th, killed 10 and wounded 29. A little over a week later, on the 25th, an explosion in Haifa killed 39 Arabs and wounded 46. During this same period 44 Jews were killed by Arabs.

The violence in Palestine in 1938 took a heavy toll: 486 Arab civilians killed and 636 wounded; 1,138 rebels killed, 196 wounded; 292 Jews killed, 649 wounded; 12 others killed, 6 wounded; 69 British killed and 233 wounded.[2]

In 1939, the leaders of the Irgun were arrested (they were released in 1940), the Arab attacks subsided, and the world edged into war. The year 1939 also brought the British White Paper restricting Jewish immigration. The Jewish community saw the White Paper as a capitulation to Arab violence, and the more militant Jews were determined to show the British that "Jewish nuisance value was no less dangerous than the Arab variety."[3]

To avoid complicating .the political struggle, the Haganah and Irgun did not engage in overt violence in response to the White Paper; instead, they began to engage in illegal immigration. According to Bauer, 16,000 people were smuggled into Palestine between 1938 and the outbreak of the war.[4] The British had set up a blockade along the coast and seized ships carrying illegal immigrants and sent them to Mauritius. On November 25, 1940, a bomb was placed on a ship loaded with immigrants to protest the British policy. The bomb exploded and the *Patria* sank killing 250 passengers.

The Jews in Palestine were not isolated from world events; their immediate struggle did not prevent them from wanting to take part in the fight against Hitler. As Ben-Gurion said, the Jews would fight with the British against Hitler as though there were no White Paper and fight against the White Paper as though there were no war. The British did not allow the Jews to form a fighting unit (composed of only 200 men) until September 1940, and it was not until September 20, 1944, that a Jewish brigade was formed.

The number of Jews who enlisted in the army was not supposed to exceed the number of Arab enlistees and the Arabs showed no inclination to fight Hitler. By the end of 1941, more than 10,000 Palestinian Jews were in the army. Meanwhile, in 1941, the Haganah created the Palmach to defend the Yishuv in the event of an emergency. The attitude of the Palestine administration was summed up by John Marlowe when he said that the administration "with almost unbelievable persistence devoted a large part of its fortunately inconsiderable energy and ability to preventing Palestinian Jews from fighting Hitler."[5]

Growing Jewish Militancy

In 1940, the Irgun split as the more militant members of the organization, led by Avraham Stern, decided to form a new group, which became known as *Lohamey Heruth Israel* (Fighters for the Freedom of Israel). It was also known as Lehi, F.F.I., and the Stern Gang. The group was small, ill-equipped, and had to rely on robberies for most of its financial support. Initially, violence was only seen as a part of the Lehi strategy to undermine British rule; however, it eventually came to be their sole course of action.

Bell asserts that Lehi was essentially anti-imperialist and sought cooperation with the Arabs. He also claims Stern was so determined in his opposition to England that he was willing to collaborate with the Axis powers although nothing came of his interest.

For the first two years of its existence, Lehi engaged in robberies and murder. On January 9, 1942, Lehi robbed a Histadrut bank, which resulted in two Jewish employees being killed. The British officers who witnessed the robbery were also killed. The Jewish community was outraged and from that point on gave no aid to Sternists. The British decided to put an end to the violence and arrested or killed most of the gang. On February 12, 1942, Stern was caught and shot "trying to escape." Afterward, the organization disintegrated, at least for a while. At about the same time, the Irgun was also falling apart, primarily as a result of the death of its leader, David Raziel, who had been killed on a mission for the British.

The Holocaust Revives the Underground

The news that arrived at the World Zionist Organization meeting in May 1942 describing the fate of European Jewry gave new impetus to the militant members of the Jewish community. The *Struma* incident that had preceded the news from Europe, in which a ship full of illegal immigrants from Romania was turned away from Palestine by the British authorities and later sank, killing 768, had already given the Sternists all the motivation they needed to reemerge as a force to be reckoned with.

On November 1, 1943, 20 Sternists escaped from Latrun prison. Among them was Nathan Friedman-Yellin, who resurrected Lehi and became its leader. Soon after, on February 1, 1944, the new leader of the Irgun, Menachem Begin, declared the revolt against the British:

There is no longer any armistice between the Jewish people and the British Administration in Eretz Israel which [turns - check] our brothers over to Hitler. Our people is at war with this regime — war to the end... This then is our demand: immediate transfer of power in Eretz Israel to a provisional Hebrew government. We shall fight, every Jew in the homeland will fight. The God of Israel, the Lord of Hosts, will aid us. There will be no retreat. Freedom — or death.[6]

The aim of the revolt was to undermine British rule in Palestine. According to Begin:

History and our observation persuaded us that if we could succeed in destroying the government's prestige in Eretz Israel, the removal of its rule would follow automatically. Thence forward we gave no peace to this weak spot. Throughout all the years of our uprising, we hit at the British government's prestige, deliberately, tirelessly, unceasingly.[7]

The Irgun formally broke with the National Zionist Organization and became financially dependent on donations, robberies, and extortion. The group claimed only about 600 members compared with more than 33,000 Haganah fighters. Of these, only a few dozen

were engaged in full-time work for the Irgun. The remainder went on with their normal lives but were at the organization's disposal.

Lehi had believed that the Irgun was not willing to fight to drive the British out of Palestine (ironically, the Irgun had the same view of the Haganah), and had taken it upon themselves to do the job. When Begin declared the beginning of the revolt, however, Lehi found that it was no longer fighting alone, but while the Irgun at least gave lip-service to the intent of attacking only military targets, Lehi "saw no political reason to spare the lives of Englishmen as long as they remained in Palestine."[8] Lehi had determined that the British would not leave Palestine because of their interests in maintaining a military base in the Middle East, the oil refining operations in Haifa, and their own economic holdings.

Although it is not clear whether he was using hindsight or found evidence of a plan, Brenner claims that Lehi decided to undermine British interests by posing a constant threat to army installations and camps, interrupting transportation with mines, and intimidating soldiers with the threat of murder. To emphasize this threat, Lehi members would patrol the streets until they found a group of British police or soldiers and then open fire on them with submachine-guns or pistols. British oil interests were to be sabotaged while their economic interests were subject to sabotage or robberies.

The violence began to escalate in February 1944. In that month, the Irgun attacked the offices of the Immigration Department located in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Haifa in a symbolic protest against the closed gates of Palestine. On the 14th, Lehi members were caught putting up posters and shot two officers who tried to arrest them. Two weeks later, on the 27th, the Irgun bombed the income tax offices in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Haifa. The situation deteriorated in March. On the 2nd, the Irgun wounded a policeman, and on the 13th Lehi killed a policeman. On March 19, a member of Lehi was killed resisting arrest — four days later, Lehi retaliated by killing two officers and wounding a third. On the same day, the Irgun tried to bomb the CID [Criminal Investigation Division] stations in Jerusalem, Haifa, and Jaffa with only the Haifa bomb causing any injuries (three dead).

The British responded by imposing curfews on Jewish towns, engaging in mass arrests; and instituting the death penalty for carrying firearms. Designed to intimidate the underground and turn the Yishuv against them, the measures had the opposite effect. They made the underground more resolute and the community more antagonistic toward British rule.

The British did succeed, however, in scaring the leadership of the Yishuv. The Jewish Agency had objected to the dissidents' violence from the beginning. After the March 2 attack, Weizmann had sent a cable to the wounded officer in which he said:

Allow me to express my horror at the hideous crime of the attempt against your life. I rejoice in your escape…My ardent wish is that the evildoers should be speedily discovered and the responsibility fixed upon the guilty.[9]

The Jewish leadership was appalled at the violence; moreover, they were afraid the militants would upset the British and jeopardize the chance of a favorable disposition of the Mandate, a possibility the leadership still believed in. They also saw no point in the violence except to harden the British resolve to keep the gates closed and turn international opinion against the creation of a Jewish homeland. The Jewish Agency leadership also feared that their own positions were being threatened by the terrorists. Consequently, on April 2, the Agency

formulated an official policy to increase propaganda against the dissidents, attempt to isolate them in the Yishuv, and prevent their activities.

In keeping with this policy, the Agency declared an open season on the Irgun and Lehi, cooperating whenever possible with the British administration. After two British officers were gunned down on April 1, the names of those responsible were given to the authorities, who surrounded a Lehi hideout and killed one man and left two more with a choice of surrender or suicide — they chose the latter.[10]

Many of the dissidents were turned into the British, including Begin's predecessor as head of the Irgun, Yaacov Meridor, and Shlomo Levi. Both eventually escaped and then were recaptured. Meridor didn't return until the day before the establishment of Israel and Levi made it back several weeks later. When the dissidents came to trial they made it a practice to engage in the symbolic gesture of refusing to accept the jurisdiction of the British courts in Palestine. Their statements made no difference in the outcome of the trials but did help to disseminate their views throughout the world, particularly to American Jews, as a result of the extensive press coverage they received. On June 20, a member of Lehi was given the death sentence for the first time, but it was commuted after the Sternists threatened a blood bath if he was hung.

The "season" made things more difficult for the underground, but the membership remained undaunted, particularly as evidence of the Holocaust began filtering out of Europe. On July 6, Moshe Shertok, the director of the Jewish Agency's political department asked the British foreign minister, Anthony Eden, to order the Allied air forces to bomb the railways and concentration camps in Hungary. By the time Shertok received the negative reply it was too late for most of Hungarian Jewry. This intransigence, combined with the British immigration policy, heightened the dissidents' resolve to fight.

The Revolt

As Yom Kippur approached in 1944, Begin announced that the shofar would be blown at the Western Wall, an act that had been prohibited by the British since the 1929 riots. On September 27, the shofar again sounded through the streets of Jerusalem while at the same time the Irgun was attacking four different British fortresses. Bell sees this event as a major psychological victory for the Irgun because they had forced the British into a "humiliating withdrawal" to avoid a confrontation at the Western Wall. In addition, the failure of the British to retaliate for the attacks on the fortresses indicated the "British could he challenged successfully, and that, as anticipated, Britain would not pursue a policy of vengeance. All the professed fears of the Jewish Agency were groundless."[11]

The dissidents' success gave them renewed confidence and led them to believe the time had come for a more daring plan, one that would focus world attention on Palestine and punish the British for their complicity in the Holocaust. The decision was made to assassinate the British High Commissioner in Palestine, Sir Harold MacMichael, but several attempts on his life failed. Lehi decided on another target, a man who also could be blamed for the fate of European Jewry, Walter Edward Guinness, better known as Lord Moyne.

Lord Moyne was a well-known Arabist and Anti-Zionist. He had served as colonial secretary and was British minister of state in Cairo. Bell reports that Joel Brand came out of Hungary

with an offer from the Nazis to trade Jews for trucks and was supposed to have received the following reply from Lord Moyne: "What would I do with a million Jews."[12]

According to Gurion, a former Irgunist, Moyne had also opposed the formation of a Jewish Army, refused to allow the *Struma* to land in Palestine, sent another ship (the *Atlantic*) to Mauritius, and had ordered the *Patria* there as well before it was blown up.[13]

On November 6, 1944, two members of Lehi, Eliyahu Hakim and Eliahu Bet-Zouri, assassinated Lord Moyne in Cairo. At the trial, as was their custom, the defendants made political statements. Beit-Zouri said:

It is wrong to assume that we represent Zionism. In fact we represent, and we are, the real owners of Palestine and as such we are engaged in a struggle to free our country from the alien rulers who have taken possession of it.[14]

The assassins were hung on March 23, 1945.

Again, it may reflect hindsight, but Bell suggests that Lehi had consciously attacked Moyne in Cairo to show the Arabs that they were not anti-Arab only anti-imperialism.

The attack also was meant to show the efficacy of armed resistance and to demonstrate that the British were not safe anywhere as long as they remained in Palestine. Brenner believes the assassination did have some impact on the Arabs, particularly in stimulating Egyptian nationalism. He also makes an even more tenuous connection between Moyne's death and the assassination of a former Prime Minister, Ahmed Mahir, who was pro-British. Apparently, some Lehi members advocated the formation of a "Semitic Bloc" to liberate the Middle East from foreign domination, an idea which made it possible for Palestinian Arabs to join the organization.[15]

The assassination of Lord Moyne outraged the Jewish community in Palestine. Ben-Gurion called for a "liquidation of the terror" and appealed to the community to assist the authorities in the "prevention of acts of terror and the elimination of its perpetrators." It is frequently alleged that the Jewish community did nothing to stop the dissidents' activities, but the Jewish Agency did make a concerted effort, particularly after Moyne's death, to bring the Irgun under control. According to Begin, the Agency and Haganah handed over a large number (one British M.P. said 1,500) of Irgunists to the British. Begin was unwilling to retaliate against his fellow Jews: "No, not civil war," he said. "Not that at any price."[16]

Friedman-Yellin, however, told the Haganah commander, Eliyahu Golomb in November 1944 that Lehi would shoot Haganah leaders and informers. Consequently, Brenner says, Lehi was left alone during the season.[17]

Although Golomb succeeded in bringing "terrorist activity to a standstill," when the season ended in June 1945, the underground emerged even stronger:

The Haganah's Season had maimed without killing, created sympathy where none had existed before, endowed the Irgun with a long-desired legitimacy, and when ended assured Begin that the great divide had been safely if painfully passed: the revolt would have the toleration of the Yishuv.[18]

The proof would not be long in coming.

The British Elections

Chaim Weizmann and most of the Zionist leadership had maintained faith in ""the British government's resolve to support the fulfillment of the Balfour Declaration despite all that had happened in the interim. With the upcoming British elections in 1945, many Jewish leaders saw the possibility of their dreams coming to fruition. The reason for their optimism was the likelihood that the Labor Party would emerge victorious. The Party had endorsed the creation of a Jewish National Home in Pales tine as Atlee wrote:

The Labor Party recalls with pride that in the days of the Great War they associated themselves with the ideal of a National Home in Palestine for the Jewish people and that ever since...have repeatedly affirmed their enthusiastic support for the effort towards its realization. They...will never falter in their active cooperation with the work now going forward in Palestine.[19]

The election was easily won by the Labor Party leading *Davar* to write: "The victory of the Labor Party...is a clear victory for the demands of the Zionists in British public opinion."[20] The Zionist leaders anxiously awaited the new Prime Minister's initiatives on Palestine. Even the Irgun and Lehi ceased their activity to see what the government would do.

On August 25, Weizmann was informed by the Colonial Office that the immigrant quota would remain at 1,500 per month. On November 13, 1945, Foreign Secretary Bevin made a speech in Parliament which vitiated the Labor platform with regard to Palestine, promising only to launch another inquiry into the issue. In Bevin's view, England had never countenanced the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine, only a home.

The Jewish community in Palestine was distraught. The dissidents simply said: "I told you so." It now became clear to everyone that the British would have to be forced to accede to Zionist demands. To carry out this objective, Moshe Sneh and Israel Galili of the Haganah, Menachem Begin of the Irgun, and Nathan Friedman-Yellin of Lehi met and decided to form a united resistance movement, Tenuat Hameri. The alliance agreed to coordinate all actions except the procurement of arms and money.

The alliance engaged in sabotage and bombings to keep the British off balance and draw them into a guerilla war of attrition. For example:

- On October 9-10, 1945, the Palmach attacked the Atlit detention camp and released 200 immigrants who were about to be deported.
- On October 31, 1945, the Palmach attacked the railway network, sabotaging it in 153 places, and also sank two police boats in Haifa and one in Jaffa..
- On November 25, 1945, the Palmach blew up two stations used by the British to monitor ships carrying illegal immigrants.
- On December 27, 1945, Irgun and Lehi blew up the CID headquarters in Jerusalem and Haifa killing 10 and injuring 12.
- On January 20, 1946, the Palmach attacked a radar station on Western Carmel used for the same purpose.
- On February 22, 1946, Haganah fighters attacked three British bases in Shfar'am, Kfar Vitkin and Sarona.
- On June 16-17, 1945, the "Night of the Bridges," the Palmach blew up 10 bridges connecting Israel with the Arab countries.

Bell describes the situation that prevailed in 1946:

All 20,000 men of the Sixth Airborne Division had been moved to the Mandate, and British troop strength continued to rise to 80,000. There were also thousands of police, units of the Transjordan Arab Legion, and others attached to security duty. There were two cruisers, three destroyers, other naval units off the coast, and naval radar and communication bases on shore. The ratio of British security forces to the Jewish population was approximately 1 to 5. By 1946 the Mandate was an armed camp, the countryside studded with the huge, concrete Tegart fortresses, British army camps, reinforced roadblocks, and observation points. The cities were constantly patrolled, and all government buildings protected by concertinas of barbed wire and sentry blocks. There were armed guards on the trains. For safety's sake, the British withdrew into wired and sandbagged compounds, self-imposed ghettos. The largest, in Jerusalem, was dubbed Bevingrad...The newspapers in the Mandate were censored, and travel was restricted. The mails were monitored, as were all overseas cable traffic. The Mandate became a garrison state under internal siege, and the garrison, despite its size equipment, and determination, proved ineffectual and self-defeating.[21]

The underground campaign continued to mount. The Haganah was primarily engaged in sabotage, the Irgun procurement of arms, and Lehi murder.

On March 24, 1946, the Haganah engaged in its first major operation against the British, sending thousands of fighters to the beach in Tel Aviv to try to prevent the British from stopping the landing of the illegal immigrant ship "Wingate." The ship was captured by the British, however, and the operation was cancelled after clashes left one Palmach soldier dead.

On April 23, 1946, the Irgun attacked a police station in Ramat Gan to steal arms. Dov Gruner was captured in the raid and would eventually become the group's first martyr. Two days after the Irgun raid, Lehi gunmen attacked the Sixth Airborne carpark and killed seven British soldiers. On June 10, the Irgun attacked trains in Lydda and on the Jerusalem to Jaffa route.

On the 13th, two members of the Irgun were convicted of capital offenses. In retaliation, the Irgun kidnapped six British officers on June 18 and 19. As was usually the case, the Jewish leadership expressed dismay at the act, but had no influence. One hostage escaped and two others were released, but the Irgun threatened to kill the remaining hostages if their men were hung by the British.

These attacks outraged the British, who began to turn on the Jewish population, rioting and looting in the streets, harassing people, and reacting with increasing severity to the slightest provocation. The British believed the terrorists could not function if it were not for the complicity of the Jewish community — all Jews were thus equally guilty. "And treated as guilty, many Jews began to regard British disgust as an honor, not a disgrace."[22]

On June 29, "Black Shabbat," the British launched a major raid throughout Palestine arresting more than 1,000 people including the acting chairman of the Jewish Agency, J.C. Fishman (Ben-Gurion was out of the country), and Moshe Shertok. Agency documents were also seized. The British searched for the Haganah weapons caches, but found only one in Kibbutz Yagur. By the beginning of July, 2,718 Jews had been arrested, 4 killed, and 80 wounded.

Most of the leaders of the underground evaded capture, although one of Lehi's leaders was caught, his captor was eventually slain in retaliation. The Yishuv continued to hold contempt

for the dissidents' methods, but became less willing to criticize them as British repression intensified.

The raids were not able to locate the kidnapped British soldiers so High Commissioner Cunningham gave in to Irgun demands and commuted the sentences of the Irgunists. The next day the Irgun released the hostages. The episode demonstrated once again to the Irgun that the British could be forced to capitulate. At the same time, the Irgun tried to show the British they meant what they said. Begin stresses the point in *The Revolt* that the Jewish community as well as the British could count on the Irgun to fulfill its promises. To their own misfortune, the British were still not convinced.

The Outrage

In the eyes of the Irgun, the British raids on the Yishuv confirmed the naiveté of the Jewish leadership. They had believed themselves immune from police retaliation and now found their headquarters occupied and many secret documents in British hands. The Irgun had little trouble deciding on an appropriate response. According to Begin, the Irgun believed that the scope of the reprisal should equal the magnitude of the attack. It followed from this notion that the proper retaliation for the attack on Jewish headquarters would be an attack on British headquarters.[23]

British headquarters had been set up during the war in the southern wing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem. The hotel served as both the military and civil administrative headquarters and was, not surprisingly, extremely well guarded and heavily fortified. The Irgun plan was to smuggle bombs into the hotel and set them on a timer that would allow the building to be evacuated. Begin stressed the desire to avoid civilian casualties and said three telephone calls were placed, one to the hotel, another to the French Consulate, and a third to the *Palestine Post*, warning that explosives in the King David Hotel would soon be detonated.

On July 22, 1946, the calls were made. The French Consulate, located near the hotel, received the call and opened the building's windows as they had been instructed. The *Palestine Post* also received a call. The call into the hotel was apparently received and ignored. Begin quotes one British official who supposedly refused to evacuate the building saying: "We don't take orders from the Jews."[24] As a result, when the bombs exploded, the casualty toll was high — a total of 91 killed and 45 injured. Among the casualties were 15 Jews. Bell acknowledged the Irgun's attempt to avoid civilian injuries by noting that few people in the hotel proper were hurt in the blast."[25]

The bombing attracted the world's attention. Two days after the bombing Atlee said: "The British Government have stated and stated again they will not be diverted by acts of violence in their search for a just and final solution to the Palestine problem."[26] The Jewish leadership issued the usual denunciations but the British were convinced the Haganah and Jewish Agency were responsible. The widespread publicity naturally cast the entire Jewish community as accomplices to terrorists. The negative publicity convinced the Jewish leaders that it was time to distance themselves from the dissidents; consequently, the Haganah withdrew from the underground alliance (on August 23).

Fallout

The disintegration of the alliance did not represent a setback to the Jewish underground because the Jewish Agency was not willing to return to the earlier policy of cooperation with British officials. By denouncing the terrorists, the Jewish leadership could avoid the negative impact of being associated with the actions. Brenner cites three reasons why the Tenuat Hameri benefitted Lehi, which can also be applied to the Irgun:

First, the F.F.I. had become more acceptable in the public eye, because the Haganah, the recognized Jewish armed force, had engaged in the same kind of warfare as they did. Secondly, as the British forces had indiscriminately killed unarmed people in Tel Aviv and elsewhere, and had sometimes behaved in a most unpopular manner, even those who were strongly opposed to violence did no longer regard it as their duty to assist the police in the prevention of acts of terrorism and the apprehension of the perpetrators. Finally, the political situation in general had deteriorated rather than improved. The survivors of the European holocaust were not permitted to land in Palestine, and their many relatives and acquaintances there felt personally, as well as po1itically, outraged by the British policy of "closed gates."[27]

Irgun attacks resumed and intensified soon after the King David bombing. On October 31, 1946, they bombed the British Embassy in Rome and, for the first time, made their presence felt in London where Irgun killers were rumored to be stalking potential victims. Public demands for stopping the terrorists became more vociferous and the British government's response more brutal.

In December, two members of the Irgun were arrested during a bank robbery and were sentenced to prison and a flogging. The Irgun let it be known that they would retaliate in kind if the sentence was carried out. On December 27, one of the men was given 18 lashes.

The Irgun issued another warning: "You will not whip Jews in their Homeland. And if Briish authorities whip them, British officers will be whipped publicly in return." The Irgun captured four British officers and gave them each 18 lashes before releasing them. Afterward the Irgun defiantly warned: "If the oppressors dare in the future to abuse the bodies and the human and national honor of Jewish youths, we shall no longer reply with the whip. We shall reply with fire..." No one was ever whipped again in Palestine.[28]

The British Cave

The year 1947 began just as the previous years following the war — with violence and recriminations. On January 26, Dov Gruner's death sentence was confirmed and the Irgun vowed to hang a British soldier for every Jew who was put to death. To emphasize their threat, they kidnaped two Englishmen, a judge and a retired officer. The Yishuv response was typically outraged. Just a few days earlier (January 21), the *Palestine Post* reported:

Repudiation by the Yishuv and the Zionist movement of murder and the shedding of innocent blood as a means of political resistance. The Yishuv will defend itself with the necessary force against domination and coercion, intimidation and threats, the extortion of money, and the use of force.

The Jewish Agency was unable to ascertain the whereabouts of the kidnap victims; however, they did learn that Gruner was not going to be hung. When the Irgun received this information they released their captives unharmed.

On March 1, the Irgun initiated 16 actions including the bombing of the officer's club in Bevingrad, which killed 20 and wounded 30. Lehi was also active. On the 13th, they destroyed two oil transport trains. Two weeks later, Sternists robbed a Tel Aviv bank .and on the 30th, they set 30,000 tons of oil on fire at the Haifa refinery. April was an equally violent month. On the 16th, Dov Gruner and three other Irgunists were hung in Acre prison provoking the most serious warning yet issued by the Irgun:

We will no longer be bound by the normal rules of warfare. In [the] future every combatant unit of Irgun will be accompanied by a war court of the Jewish Underground Movement. Every enemy subject who is taken prisoner will immediately be brought before the court, irrespective of whether he is a member of the Army or Civilian Administration. Both are criminal organizations. He will be tried for entering illegally into Palestine, for illegal possession of arms and their use against civilians, for murder, oppression and exploitation; there will be no appeal against the decision of the people's court. Those condemned will be hanged or shot.[29]

Since the British did not see the terrorists as an army operating under normal rules of warfare, they no doubt saw little reason to expect a change in their behavior. They were wrong.

Two members of Lehi were to be hung on April 21 and the Irgun tried unsuccessfully to kidnap soldiers to use as a threat. Rather than hang, however, the two men committed suicide. On April 22, Lehi fighters attacked an army transport near Rehovot. The following day the Cairo-Haifa train was ambushed and 8 people were killed and 27 wounded. On the 24th, Lehi destroyed the headquarters of the British Mobile Force and 4 soldiers were killed in an unrelated incident when their truck hit a mine. The following day 4 people were killed by a bomb at a police station in Sarona. The violence continued yet another day as a Haifa CID chief, an inspector, and 3 other officers were killed in Tel Aviv.[30]

Jailbreak

The events of April were a mere prelude to the spectacular attack planned for May: the target, Acre prison. Acre was a centuries old fortress which had withstood attacks from some of the world's most awesome armies, including Napoleon's. The fortress now housed a prison holding hundreds of captured underground fighters. A former Irgunist, Itzhak Gurion, explained the motivation for attacking Acre:

The Irgun now concentrated on this fortress with the aim of delivering a death-blow to British prestige, of forestalling the new Bevin intrigues and of warning the UN not to draw out the Palestine deliberations.[31]

The assault on the fortress was launched on May 4, 1947, and was a spectacular success for the underground.

Although the Acre operation was successful, there were several Irgunists who were captured. On June 9, the Irgun captured two policemen to use as bargaining chips but they escaped. Meanwhile, the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) was on its way to Palestine and the Jewish leadership wanted to curb underground activities. While their activities were being curtailed, five of the Irgun's members were being sentenced, three to death, for their part in the Acre attack.

On June 24, the Chairman of the UNSCOP, Emil Sandstrom of Sweden, assistant to the Committee, Dr. Ralph Bunche of the United States, and Sandstrom's secretary, Dr. Victor Hoo of China met secretly with Begin to obtain his opinion on a settlement for Palestine. Begin outlined the Irgun's aims:

1) The Irgun considers Eretz Israel as the land of the Jewish people.
2) Eretz Israel consists of both sides of the Jordan, including Transjordan. "Transjordan"...is an English term that is incorrect. In the original Hebrew both sides of the Jordan were, in effect, called Transjordan." The early Hebrews... first conquered what is today known as Transjordan and crossed into Palestine from east to west. The Irgun considers the whole territory as Jewish territory and aims at the creation of a Jewish Republic under a democratic government.
3) Immediate repatriation of all Jews wishing to be repatriated to Palestine.
The exact number of Hebrew repatriates is unknown but runs into the millions. A choice should be given to all Jews who wish to return to Palestine. Their return is prevented only by British illegal rule and by British armed force, which should be removed. A Jewish government would undertake the repatriation of Jews with international help.
4) We reject any statement made by the Labor Party as to the transfer of any Arabs from the country. There is enough room in Palestine for all, both Jews and Arabs.
5) Since Britain has decided to keep the country under her own control by force of arms, there is no other way to accomplish our aims than to meet force with force.[32]

The fourth point is particularly interesting in light of the claim that would be in the months ahead — especially after Deir Yassin — that the Irgun was trying to drive the Arabs out of Palestine. The reader should have noticed that the recitation of terrorist acts did not include a single operation against the Arab population of Palestine. It should also be noted that the Palestinian Arabs made no effort to join in the revolt or take any independent action to drive the British out of their homeland.

The UNSCOP had tried to resurrect the old absorptive capacity argument and argue that the number of Jews was a cause of Arab resentment. Begin pointed out that 5 to 7 million people had lived in Palestine in ancient times and he saw no reason why the land could not support a similar population now. Arab resentment he attributed to British instigation. Although he acknowledged some Arabs were threatening war over partition, Begin did not feel it should effect the UN decision. Begin also voiced his opposition to partition. He opposed it on principle because of his belief that all of Palestine was part of the biblical Jewish homeland.

How much of an impression Begin made on the commission is unclear; however, two of the other members of the UNSCOP, Garcia-Granados of Guatemala and Fabregat of Uruguay also spoke with Begin and were the main proponents of the majority plan. Throughout the UN debate, these two men were the staunchest supporters of the Jewish position.

The Final Straw

On July 11, 1947, the *Exodus* left Sete, France, for Palestine carrying 4,515 refugees. On July 18, the ship had just about reached Gaza when it was intercepted by the British and forced to dock in Haifa. England's policy had been to deport illegal refugees to detention camps in Cyprus, but Bevin decided to employ a new tactic to discourage the immigrants; the refugees would be sent back to their original point of departure. In keeping with this policy, the passengers of the *Exodus* were herded onto three British prison ships and sent back to Sete.

When the ships arrived on the 29th, however, the refugees refused to leave the ships. The London correspondent for *Haaretz*, Aryeh Felbaum, described what he saw:

On approaching the *Ocean Vigour* I witnessed the most terrible spectacle I have ever seen in my life. It was a spectacle I shall never forget. On the deck, in narrow, very high cages, worse than those in a zoo, surrounded by barbed wire, were crowded together my brothers and sisters of all ages. There the sun had beaten down on their heads for 18 days at sea. They had not even been able to lie down at night. Between the cages stood red bereted guards isolating each cage.[33]

On August 22, the ships left Sete for Hamburg where they landed on September 9. The refugees aboard the *Empire Rival* left the ship quickly because they had left a bomb in the hold. The other two shiploads of people tried to remain on the ships, resisting any effort to displace them. Eventually, all three ships were emptied of their human cargo and delivered into the waiting arms of the Germans who interned them in camps.

While the tragedy of the *Exodus* was being played out, a new drama was unfolding in Palestine. On July 12, the Irgun finally succeeded in kidnaping two British officers, Sergeants Cliff Marin and Mervyn Paice. The British, aided by the Haganah, launched a massive search for the missing men but were unable to locate them. For over two weeks there was no word on the sergeants. During that period 13 British were killed and 77 wounded in underground attacks while only one terrorist was killed. Then, on July 29, three Irgunists involved in the Acre breakout were hung.

The Irgun response was delivered in the *Irgunpress*:

We recognize no one-sided laws of war. If the British are determined that their way out of the country should be lined by an avenue of gallows and of weeping fathers, mothers, wives, and sweethearts, we shall see to it that in this there is no racial discrimination. The gallows will not be all of one color...Their price will be paid in full.[34]

The same day the Irgun hung the two sergeants and booby-trapped their bodies.

As usual, the Jewish Agency issued denunciations. For example, Shertok said: “It is mortifying to think that some Jews should have become so depraved by the horrible iniquities in Europe as to be capable of such vileness.”[35]

This time the British could not be so easily appeased, the soldiers went on a rampage attacking cars and buses in Tel Aviv. Cafes and shops were also targets of the soldiers’ rage which left 5 Jews dead, 15 seriously injured, and many more bruised.

The impact of the hanging of the sergeants was naturally outrage, but it was also symbolized by the Manchester Guardian headline: “Time To Go.” Bell explains the prevailing attitude:

The *Guardian* was perceptive; for the wave of revulsion in Britain was directed as much against British presence and tactics as against Jewish terror: the exhausted Exodus refugees dragged screaming back from the Promised Land, the death of two young men trapped in a humiliating and pointless struggle against a persecuted people, the weekly lists of dead and maimed that brought no thanks from either Jew or Arab. So, instead of adamant demands for vengeance and reprisals, as some expected, the consensus gradually formed, as the Guardian predicted, that the time for evacuation had arrived.[36]

The Irgun and Lehi were not about to ease the pressure on the British. On August 8, 1947, Sternists attacked trains near Haifa and Hedera. On September 26, Sternists robbed Barcley's Bank in Tel Aviv and, three days later, Irgunists blew up the police headquarters in Haifa, killing 10 and wounding 54. After a relatively quiet October, violence flared again in November. On the 5th, four soldiers were shot in an outdoor café in Haifa. Eight days later, four British civilians were gunned down on a Haifa street corner and Lehi avenged the shooting of three school girls and one boy training for the gang by tossing grenades into a café, killing one soldier and injuring 27. Two policemen were also shot in Jerusalem. The following day two more soldiers and two policemen were killed.

The Underground Surfaces

When the United Nations finally voted to partition Palestine, the vast majority of Jews were overjoyed. True, the Jewish state was not as big as they had hoped, and its checkerboard configuration was going to be difficult to defend, but at last, after 2,000 years, there was to be a Jewish state again in Palestine. There were a minority of Jews who were not satisfied; however, among them were the members of the Irgun and Lehi. This was Begin's reaction to the UN decision:

The partition of the Homeland is illegal. It will never be recognized. The signature by institutions and individuals of the partition agreement is invalid. It will not bind the Jewish people. Jerusalem was and will forever be our capital. Eretz Israel will be restored to the people of Israel. All of it. And for ever.[37]

Violence erupted immediately after the UN decision as Arab mobs attacked Jews. The underground, which had concentrated all its efforts on driving the British out of Palestine, now had a new enemy to confront. According to Begin, the first counterattacks were launched on December 11-13, 1947.[38] On December 29, the first wanton act against civilians was carried out when a bomb placed at the Damascus Gate in Jerusalem exploded killing 15 Arabs and wounding more than 50. On January 7, 1948, Irgunists pushed a barrel bomb loaded with scrap metal into a crowd at a bus stop near Jaffa Gate, which killed 17 Arabs and wounded 50 more.

The British remained an obstinate enemy. They had taken the position of "neutrality," refusing to cooperate in the implementation of the partition resolution and retaining control over Palestine. Even as that control began to slip away and the country began to slip into war, the British maintained their blockade, preventing immigrants who would be needed in the upcoming fight, from entering the country. Their neutrality also required them to enforce prohibitions against possessing arms even as the Arabs were attacking Jewish convoys and settlements. Meanwhile, Arab guerrillas were infiltrating the country with British knowledge. In addition, while an arms ban was being enforced against the Jews (the U.S. maintained an embargo throughout the war), Britain was arming the Arabs, directly through a subsidy to Transjordan, whose legion would soon invade Palestine (under the leadership of a British officer) and, indirectly, through an arms agreement with Iraq signed on January 9, 1948.

On February 12, 1948, the British arrested four members of the Haganah and turned them over to an Arab mob in Jerusalem, which shot one and castrated the others before hacking them to death.. Afterward, the Haganah resisted being disarmed. Two weeks later, Sternists launched an "all-out" attack on British troops in Jerusalem.

On February 22, six soldiers who defected from the British army planted explosives on Ben Yehuda Street in the heart of Jerusalem, destroying four buildings, killing 58 people and wounding 38. A week later, resistance fighters n attacked a British troop transport near Rehovot killing five soldiers and wounding 35.

The British were committed to pull out of Palestine, so the militants believed they had achieved their objective. In addition, by April 1948, the infiltration of Arab guerrillas and increasing severity of fighting with these irregular forces caused a shift in priorities from battling British forces to fighting the Arabs.

War Approaches

Though Israel had not yet been formally established, an undeclared war over Palestine was already in progress. The Haganah was engaged in a desperate effort to break the Arab blockade that was strangling the Jews in Jerusalem and beginning to mount operations with an eye toward improving the future state's security. The underground groups were now openly cooperating in some of these operations. One of the most controversial was the assault on Deir Yassin on April 9, which killed more than 100 Arabs, including many civilians.

A more significant battle, from a military standpoint, took place at the end of the month when the Irgun decided to attack the predominantly Arab town of Jaffa. Begin claimed that Arab attacks emanating from Jaffa had killed or injured nearly a thousand Jews. Although this is probably an exaggeration, snipers and Arab mobs threatened Tel Aviv's civilian population. Begin also feared that Jaffa would be used by the Arabs to bombard Tel Aviv once the British withdrew.

The Irgun assault on Jaffa stimulated another Arab exodus. This time some 60,000 Arabs fled their homes. Begin claimed they left because of "the name of their attackers and the repute which propaganda had bestowed on them" and "the weight of our bombardment." It was probably the second factor that had the dominant impact since "confusion and terror, deepened by the noise of the battle raging at no great distance from the central streets, reigned in the town."[39]

The Irgun succeeded in neutralizing Jaffa as a military threat, but it was prevented from capturing the city by the intervention of British forces.

Meanwhile, Arab forces were also changing the situation on the ground and engaging in their own efforts to improve their strategic position in advance of the planned invasion by the surrounding Arab armies. For example, on May 4, the Arab Legion launched a devastating attack on the settlement at Kfar Etzion killing 240 people, many after they had surrendered. There were only four survivors.

The Arab Invasion

On May 14, 1948, just after Israel declared its independence, five Arab armies (Egypt, Syria, Transjordan, Lebanon and Iraq) invaded Israel. Their intentions were declared by Azzam Pasha, Secretary-General of the Arab League: "It will be a war of annihilation. It will be a momentous massacre in history that will be talked about like the massacres of the Mongols or the Crusades."[40]

That morning, units of the Haganah and the Irgun began "Operation Pitchfork" to take over the positions evacuated by the British. The Haganah took control of all the British positions in central and southern Jerusalem while the Irgun captured Sheikh Jarah, extending the Jewish perimeter as far as Mount Scopus.

Despite their large populations, at the time of the invasion the Arab armies were comprised of only 80,000 men. The Haganah had 60,000 trained fighters, a third of whom had combat experience, but on May 12, only 18,900 people were fully mobilized, armed, and prepared for war. The Jews' strategic position was even worse according to Collins:

In almost every instance the Arabs held the superior terrain. In Tulkarm they were less than ten miles from the sea and the possibility of cutting the Yishuv in half. The Arab communities of Lydda and Ramle were only minutes from the heart of Tel Aviv. The Negev seemed wide open to Egypt's armor. Jerusalem, above all, remained completely cut off.[41]

The underground, which had been coming closer and closer to the surface finally was able to come out into the open after the proclamation of the new state. After May 15, the vast majority of the underground was absorbed into the *Zahal*, the Israeli Defense Forces, which was composed primarily of Haganah members. On May 28, Lehi formally disbanded as 850 of its fighters marched together to join the Zahal.

The activities of the underground did not cease entirely. Two events stand out. The first involved an effort by the Irgun to bring in a ship laden with arms. The *Altalena* tried to land at Kfar Vitkim on June 20, 1948. The leadership of the new state feared that the remaining dissidents were a threat to their authority and suspected a possible coup attempt. Ben-Gurion ordered the Zahal to prevent the ship from landing. The Irgun resisted and, after suffering a number of casualties, withdrew the ship and headed for Tel Aviv where the Zahal welcomed it with a barrage of shells. During what soon became an all-out battle the Altalena was set on fire and had to be abandoned. The fighting left 14 Irgunists dead and 69 wounded while two members of Zahal were killed and six wounded.

The other incident took place as the war with the Arabs was winding down and the UN had appointed Count Folke Bernadotte to mediate settlement talks. Bernadotte was a respected Swedish diplomat who had formulated a proposal to end the fighting, which involved Israel ceding most of the Negev to the Arabs and receiving in return more of the Galilee in the north. The provisional government of Israel rejected the plan. The remaining members of Lehi saw it as a threat to Israel's existence, and they considered Bernadotte a Nazi collaborator and a British pawn. On September 16, Bernadotte was assassinated by a group called *Hazi ha-Moledeth* (Fatherland Front), which was just a cover for Lehi. In all likelihood, the assassination was carried out by a very small number of ex-Lehi members acting on their own. No one was ever convicted for the murder.[42]

Conclusion

When the war ended so did the terrorist activity of the Jewish underground. In August 1948, the newly formed Israeli cabinet voted to issue an ultimatum telling the Irgun and Lehi to join the IDF (thereby losing their own organizational identity) or force would be used against them.[43] The groups disbanded and were integrated into the army the following month.

The members of the underground went on to found political parties and become respected citizens of Israel. The most well known was Menachem Begin, who founded the right-wing opposition Herut party and later served as Prime Minister. Begin's economics minister, Yaacov Meridor, had preceded Begin as the head of the Irgun. Yitzhak Shamir, Begin's foreign minister and later prime minister, was a leader of Lehi.

The gaining of respectability is seen by some as evidence that the dissidents were not terrorists but, as F.F.I.'s initials implied, freedom fighters. Begin uses an etymological argument in *The Revolt* in an attempt to show that the word "terror" could not be applied to a revolutionary war of liberation which is what they had undertaken. He makes a more convincing argument based on the Irgun's designs:

In building our organization, too, we created no group of assassins to lurk in wait for important victims. From foundation to attic we set up our underground as an army which planned attacks on the most vital enemy targets, which shook the very foundations of the enemy's military establishment and his civil rule, which brought about enemy losses in the course of military attacks. We began, it is true, with a small underground army, numbering not more than several hundreds. But our strength increased pari passu with the intensification of the struggle ...We were not a "terrorist" group — neither in the structure of our organization, in our methods of warfare, nor in spirit.[44]

Begin and his cohorts attached a great deal more significance on their impact than they deserved. After all, terrorism had little impact on the British resolve to stay in Ireland. What impact they did have was mainly negative, particularly in terms of the publicity they gave to Palestine. The militants did put Palestine at the center of the world stage, but the international community, the media, the Jewish leadership, and most of the Yishuv considered the Irgun and Lehi terrorists. Brenner explains their actions as "a reflection of the international 'terrorism,' lawlessness and disrespect for human life which characterized the 1940's."[45] The notion that the ends justify the means was certainly implicit in the underground ideology, but it did not start out that way.

The underground evolved from an organization designed to protect Jewish settlements into a human smuggling operation that succeeded in bringing more than 100,000 illegal immigrants into Palestine between 1934 and May 1948. An additional 65,000 were intercepted by the British between 1946 and February 1948 and interned on Cyprus. The possibility of partitioning Palestine generated ideological splits that fragmented the Jewish community into those who favored a political solution and those who believed a military campaign was necessary to liberate Palestine. Even the militants were willing to take the political route, however, when that option appeared promising. When diplomacy failed, violence was in their view the only alternative.

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